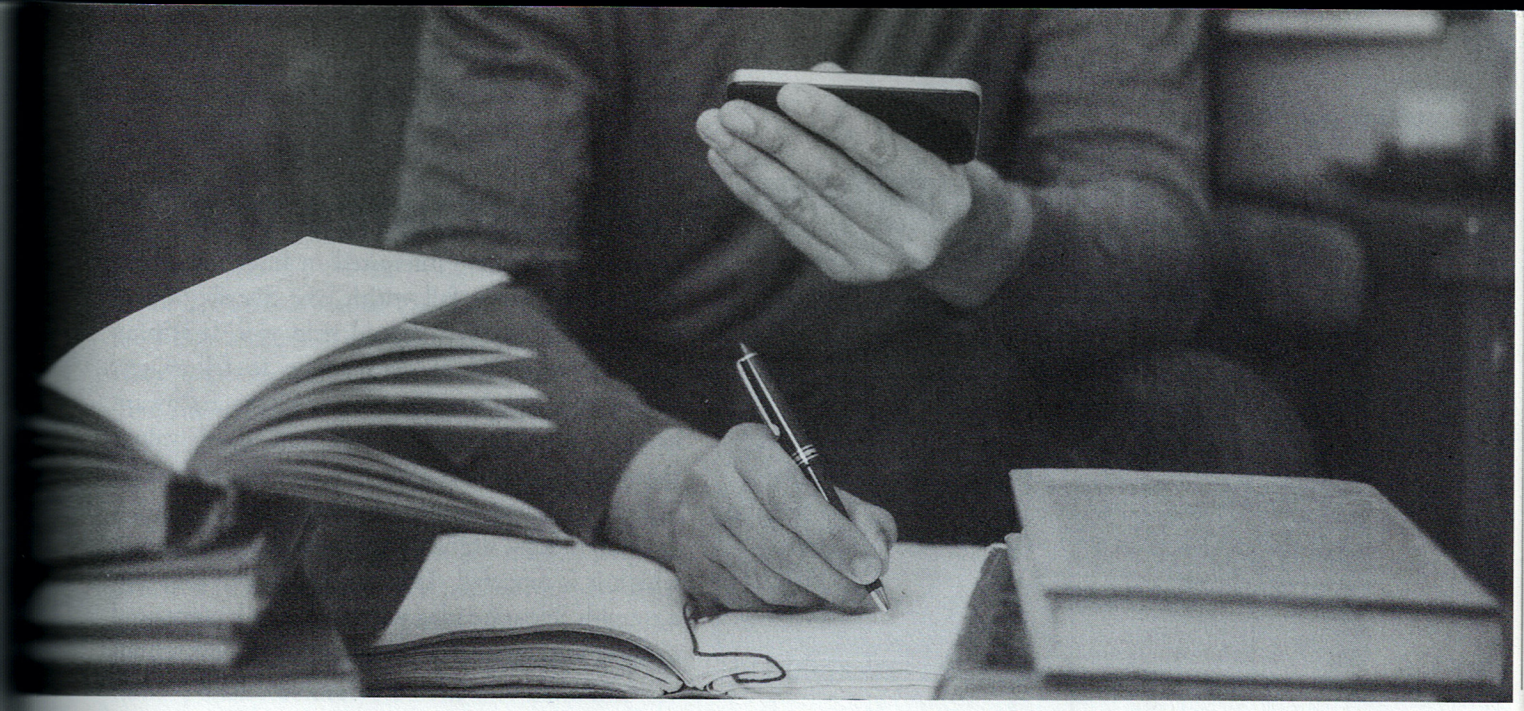

Chapter 7
Law School Admissions

The process of applying to law school, although simple enough in theory, is viewed by many to be about as painful as a root canal. The best way to avoid the pain is to start early. If you're reading this in December, hoping to get into a law school for the following year, and haven't done anything about it, you're in big trouble. If you've got an LSAT score that you're happy with, you're in less trouble. However, your applications will get to the law schools after the optimum time and the applications themselves, even with the most cursory glance by an admissions officer, may appear rushed. The best way to think about applying is to start early in the year, take care of one thing at a time, and be totally finished by December.

This chapter is mainly a nuts-and-bolts manual on how to apply to law school and when to do it. A checklist, information about Law School Forums, fee waivers, the Credential Assembly Service (CAS), and several admissions calendars, which will show you when you need to take which step, are included.

LSAC, LSAT, CAS

The Law School Admission Council (LSAC), headquartered in Newtown, Pennsylvania, is the governing body that oversees the creation, testing, and administration of the LSAT (Law School Admission Test). The LSAC also runs the Credential Assembly Service (CAS), which provides information (in a standard format) on law school applicants to the schools themselves. All American Bar Association, or ABA-approved, law schools are members of LSAC.

LSAT SCORE DISTRIBUTION

Most test-takers are interested in knowing where their LSAT scores fall within the distribution of all scores. This chart should help you determine how well you did in comparison to fellow test takers over the last few years. Please be aware, however, that percentiles are not fixed values that remain constant over time. Unlike an LSAT score, a percentile rank associated with a given test score may vary slightly depending on the year in which it is reported. This chart is just to give you a roughly accurate idea where you rank compared to those competing for the same spot in law school.

Score	% Below	Score	% Below	Score	% Below	Score	% Below
180	99.9	165	93.2	150	44.9	135	5.3
179	99.9	164	91.4	149	41.0	134	4.4
178	99.9	163	89.7	148	37.0	133	3.5
177	99.8	162	87.3	147	33.4	132	2.9
176	99.7	161	84.9	146	29.6	131	2.3
175	99.6	160	82.2	145	26.4	130	1.9
174	99.5	159	79.1	144	23.3	129	1.5
173	99.3	158	76.5	143	20.2	128	1.2
172	99.0	157	72.6	142	17.7	127	0.9
171	98.5	156	68.7	141	15.2	126	0.7
170	98.1	155	65.7	140	12.9	125	0.6
169	97.5	154	61.5	139	10.9	124	0.5
168	96.7	153	57.3	138	9.2	123	0.4
167	95.7	152	53.2	137	7.8	122	0.3
166	94.6	151	49.1	136	6.5	121	0.3
						120	0.0

WHEN TO APPLY

Consider these application deadlines for fall admission: Yale Law School, on or about February 15; New York University (NYU) Law School, on or about February 15; Loyola University Chicago School of Law, on or about May 1. Although some of this information may make starting the application process in December seem like a viable option, remember that law schools don't wait until they've received every application to start selecting students. In fact, the longer you wait to apply to a school, the worse your chances are of getting into that school. Maybe your chances will go only from 90 percent to 85 percent, but you shouldn't take an unnecessary risk by waiting.

Additionally, some schools have "early admissions decisions" options, so that you may know by December if you've been accepted (for instance, NYU's early admission deadline is on or about November 15). This option is good for a few reasons: it can give you an indication of what your chances are at other schools; it can relieve the stress of waiting until April to see where you're going to school; and if you're put on the waiting list the first time around, you might be accepted a bit later on in the process—i.e., when everyone else is hearing from law schools for the first time. However, not every school has an early admission option, and not every school's option is the same, so check with your prospective institutions' policies before you write any deadlines on your calendar.

Law School Forums

Law School Forums are an excellent way to talk with representatives and gather information on almost every law school in the country simultaneously. More than 150 schools send admissions officers to these forums, which take place in major cities around the country between February and October. If at all possible, GO. For information about forum dates and locations, check the LSAC website at www.lsac.org.

Let's take a look at the major steps in the application process.

- **Take the LSAT.** All ABA-approved and most non-ABA-approved law schools in the United States and Canada accept an LSAT score from each applicant. The LSAT is offered multiple times each year. Some schools may accept a GRE score from students who have not taken the LSAT.
- **Register for CAS.** You can register online for the Credential Assembly Service at the same time you register to take the LSAT.
- **Select approximately seven schools.** After you've selected your schools, you'll be able to see which schools want what types of things on their applications—although almost all of them will want three basic things: a personal statement, recommendations, and a résumé. Each applicant should be thinking about putting law schools into three categories: (1) "reach" schools, (2) schools where you've got a good chance of being accepted, and (3) "safety" schools. At a minimum, each applicant should apply to two to three schools in each category. (Most admissions experts will say either 2-2-3 or 2-3-2.) It is not uncommon for those with extremely low grades or low LSAT scores (or both) to apply to 15 or 20 schools.
- **Write your personal statement(s).** It may be that you'll need to write only one personal statement (many schools will ask that your personal statement be about why you want to obtain a law degree), but you may need to write several—which is why you need to select your schools fairly early.
- **Obtain two or three recommendations.** Some schools will ask for two recommendations, at least one of which should be academic (both if you are a recent graduate). Others want more than two recommendations and want at least one of your recommenders to be someone who knows you outside traditional academic circles.

- **Update/create a résumé.** Most law school applications ask that you submit a résumé. Make sure yours is up to date and suitable for submission to an academic institution.
- **Get your academic transcripts sent to CAS.** A minor administrative detail, seemingly, but then again, if you forget to do this, CAS will not send your information to the law schools. CAS helps the law schools by acting as a clearinghouse for information—CAS, not you, sends the law schools your undergraduate and graduate school transcripts, your LSAT score(s), and an undergraduate academic summary.

Those are the major steps in applying to law school. From reading this chapter, you might discover that there are other steps you need to take—such as preparing an addendum to your application, asking for application fee waivers, applying for a special administration of the LSAT, and so on. If you sense that you might need to do anything special, start your application process even earlier than what is recommended. One LSAC sample schedule recommends taking the June LSAT for fall admission the following year. This schedule allows you to focus on the LSAT in the spring and early summer and then start the rest of your application process rolling. That's good advice—as mentioned in the LSAT portion of this book, the LSAT is one of the most important factors in getting into the best law school possible.

The sample schedule also indicates that you should research schools in late July/early August. While you are doing this, go ahead and subscribe to CAS and send your transcript request forms to your undergraduate and any other educational institutions—there's no reason to wait until September to do this (you should pay CAS for seven law school applications, unless you're positive you want to apply to only a few schools). Why do this? Because undergraduate institutions can and will make mistakes and delay the transcript process—even when you go there personally and pay them to provide your records. This is essential if you're applying for early decision at some law schools—the transcript process can be a nightmare.

Finally, you should send your applications to law schools between late September and early November. Naturally, if you bombed the LSAT the first time around, you're still in good shape to take the test again in October. Another good piece of news on that front is that more and more law schools are now just simply taking the highest LSAT score that each applicant has, rather than averaging multiple scores. If you have to take the LSAT again, this is good news—but with proper preparation, you can avoid having to spend too much quality time with the LSAT.

A Simple Checklist

The following is a simple checklist for the major steps of the application process. Each shaded box indicates the recommended month during which you should complete that action.

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Take practice LSAT	■											
Research LSAT prep companies		■										
Obtain Registration Information Book			■									
Register for June LSAT				■								
Take LSAT prep course				■	■	■						
Take LSAT						■						
Register for Credential Assembly Service (CAS)—formerly known as the Law School Data Assembly Service							■					
Research law schools							■					
Obtain law school applications								■				
Get transcripts sent to CAS								■				
Write personal statement(s)									■			
Update/create résumé									■			
Get recommendations									■			
Send early decision applications										■		
Finish sending all applications											■	
Relax												■

HELPFUL HINTS ON PERSONAL STATEMENTS, RECOMMENDATIONS, RÉSUMÉS, AND ADDENDA

Although your LSAT score is one of the most important factors in the admissions process, you should still present a professional résumé, get excellent recommendations, and hone your personal statement when preparing your law school applications.

Many law schools still employ the "three-pile" system in the application process.

Pile 1 contains applicants with high enough LSAT scores and GPAs to admit them pretty much automatically.

Pile 2 contains applicants who are "borderline"—decent enough LSAT scores and GPAs for that school but not high enough for automatic admission. Admissions officers look at these applications thoroughly to sort out the best candidates.

Pile 3 contains applicants with "substandard" LSAT scores and GPAs for that school. These applicants are usually rejected without much further ado. There are circumstances in which admissions officers will look through pile 3 for any extraordinary applications, but it doesn't happen very often.

What does this mean? Well, if you're lucky, you are in pile 2 (and not pile 3!) for at least one of your "reach" schools. And if you are, there's a good possibility that your application will be thoroughly scrutinized by the admissions committee. Consequently, make sure the following four elements of your application are as strong as you can possibly make them.

Personal Statement

Ideally, your personal statement should be two pages long. Often, law schools will ask you to identify exactly why you want to go to law school and obtain a law degree. "I love *How To Get Away with Murder*" is not the answer to this question. There should be some moment in your life, some experience that you had, or some intellectual slant that you are interested in that is directing you to law school. Identify that reason, write about it, and make it compelling.

Then you should have three or four people read your personal statement and critique it. You should select people whom you respect intellectually, not people who will merely give it a cursory read and tell you it's fine. Also, your personal statement is not the place to make excuses, get on your soapbox, or try your hand at alliterative verse. Make it intelligent, persuasive, short, and powerful—those are the writing and analytical qualities law schools look for.

Recommendations

Most law schools ask for two or three recommendations. Typically, the longer it has been since you've graduated, the tougher it is to obtain academic recommendations. However, if you've kept your papers and if your professors were tenured, chances are you'll still be able to find them and obtain good recommendations—just present your prof of choice with your personal statement and a decent paper you did in his or her course. That way, the recommender has something tangible to work from. And that's the simple secret to great recommendations—if the people you're asking for recommendations don't know anything specific about you, how can the recommendation possibly be compelling? Getting the mayor of your town or a state senator to write a recommendation helps only if you have a personal and professional connection to them in some way. That way, the recommender will be able to present to the admissions committee actual qualities and accomplishments you have demonstrated.

Fee Waivers

Even though the cost of taking the LSAT, subscribing to CAS, paying for LSAT prep materials, and paying application fees will probably be one-hundredth of your total law school outlay, it's still not just a drop in the bucket. The LSAT is $200, CAS is $195 (includes one report sent to a CAS-requiring law school and three letters of recommendation), plus $45 for each additional school you are applying to. And law school applications themselves are typically around $50 each. As a result, LSAC, as well as most law schools, offers a fee waiver program. If you're accepted into the LSAC program, you get two free LSATs per year, one LSAT Writing, one CAS subscription, and four CAS law school reports. With proper documentation, you can also waive a good portion of your law school application fees. You can apply for a fee waiver through your LSAC.org account.

If you've been out of school for some time and are having trouble finding academic recommendations, choose people from your workplace, from the community, or from any other area of your life that is important to you. You should respect the people you choose—you should view them as quality individuals who have in some way shaped your life. If they're half as good as you think they are, they will know, at least intuitively, that they in some way were responsible for part of your development or education, and they will then be able to talk intelligently about it. Simply put, these people should know who you are, where you live, what your background is, and what your desires and motivations are—otherwise, your recommendations will not distinguish you from the 10-foot-high pile that's on an admissions committee desk.

Résumés

Résumés are a fairly simple part of your application, but make sure yours is updated and proofed correctly. Errors on your résumé (and, indeed, anywhere on your application) will make you look as if you don't really care too much about going to law school. Just remember that this should be a more academically oriented résumé, because you are applying to an academic institution. Put your academic credentials and experiences first—no matter what they are.

Addenda

If your personal and academic life has run fairly smoothly, you shouldn't need to include any addenda with your application. Addenda are brief explanatory letters written to explain or support a "deficient" portion of your application. Some legitimate addenda topics are academic probation, low/discrepant GPA, low/discrepant LSAT score, arrests/convictions, DUI/DWI suspensions, a leave of absence or other "time gaps," and other similar circumstances.

The addenda are not the place to go off on polemics about standardized testing—if you've taken the LSAT two or three times and simply did not do very well, after spending time preparing with a test prep company or private tutor, merely tell the admissions committee that that's what you've done—you worked as hard as you could to achieve a high score and explored all possibilities to help you achieve that goal. Then let them draw their own conclusions. Additionally, addenda should be brief and balanced—do not go into detailed descriptions of things. Explain the problem and state what you did about it. Simply put, do not whine.

GATHERING INFORMATION AND MAKING DECISIONS

There are some key questions that you should ask before randomly selecting law schools around the country or submitting your application to someone or other's list of the "top ten" law schools and saying, "If I don't get in to one of these schools, I'll go to B-School instead." Here are some questions to think about.

Where Would You Like to Practice Law?

For instance, if you were born and bred in the state of Nebraska, care deeply about it, wish to practice law there, and want to someday be governor, then it might be a better move to go to the University of Nebraska School of Law than, say, the University of Virginia, even though UVA is considered a "top ten" law school. A law school's reputation is usually greater on its home turf than anywhere else (except for Harvard and Yale). Apply to the schools in the geographic area where you wish to practice law. You'll be integrated into the community, you may gain some experience in the region doing clinics during law school, and it should be easier for you to get more interviews and position yourself as someone who already knows, for instance, Nebraska.

What Type of Law Would You Like to Practice?

Law schools *do* have specialties. For instance, if you are very interested in environmental law, it might be better to go to Vermont Law School than to go to NYU. Vermont Law School is one of the most highly regarded schools in the country when it comes to environmental law; so look at what you want to do in addition to where you want to do it.

Can You Get In?

Many people apply to Harvard. Very few get in. Go right ahead and apply, if you wish, but unless you've got killer scores and/or have done some very outstanding things in your life, your chances are, well, *slim*. Apply to a few reach schools, but make sure they are schools you really want to go to.

Did You Like the School When You Went There?

What if you decided to go to Stanford, got in, went to Palo Alto, California, and decided that you hated it? The weather was horrible! The architecture was mundane! There's nothing to do nearby! Well, maybe Stanford wasn't the best example—but you get the point. Go to the school and check it out. Talk to students and faculty. Walk around. *Then* make a decision.

Summary

- The application process, although detailed, is much easier than taking the extremely stressful LSAT, which in turn will be much easier than your first year of law school—no matter where you go. However, you've still got to *want* to go to law school. Applying to law school is a demanding process, and if you're not committed to doing it well, it will almost certainly come across in your applications. Be as thorough in preparing your applications as you were in preparing for the LSAT; otherwise you run the risk of turning in applications that are late or contain errors, thereby hurting your chances of getting accepted by the schools to which you really want to go.
- If all this administrative stuff seems overwhelming (i.e., you're the type of person who dreads filling out a deposit slip), the major test-prep companies have designed law school application courses that force you to think about where you want to go and make sure you've got all your recommendations, résumés, personal statements, addenda, and everything else together.
- Whatever your level of administrative faculty, the choice of where you want to go to school is yours. You'll probably be paying a lot of money to go, so you should really make sure you go to the place that's best for you. Take the time to research the schools because you'll be paying for law school for a long, long time.